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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MEXICO 002235

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SUBJECT: SECRETARY OF DEFENSE TESTIFIES BEFORE CONGRESS

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR CHARLES V. BARCLAY, JR.,
FOR REASONS 1.4 (B/D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On April 27, Secretary Guillermo Galvan spent nearly two hours fielding questions and offering comments to 19 legislators in a public hearing called by the Chamber of Deputies' Defense Committee to discuss the military's growing role in counter narcotics operations. Galvan's first public encounter with legislators was one the few undertaken in recent years by a SEDENA chief, and was characterized by a member of President Calderon's staff as a useful "ice-breaker." End Summary.

¶2. (C) There were few surprises. Presidential National Security advisor Sigrid Arzt told Poloff that questions were submitted to SEDENA in advance and lawmakers were on their best behavior. The hearing yielded few groundbreaking insights. General Galvan listened politely as a multi-party succession of deputies issued platitudes about the armed forces and held forth on issues ranging from illegal logging (from a Green Party legislator), the plight of retired military personnel and SEDENA's treatment of HIV positive soldiers.

¶3. (SBU) Nevertheless, the event gave lawmakers opportunity to press Galvan on a number of fundamental issues. They asked for Galvan's assessment of the impact current Counternarcotic surge operations were having on the health of his institution, whether they were achieving their desired effect, what the military was doing to stem mounting desertions from the ranks and whether he agreed with the push within congress to overturn or amend Mexico's nearly 70 year old neutrality law.

¶3. (SBU) Demonstrating a fair degree political skill for a neophyte appearing for the first time before legislators, Galvan was alternatively forward-leaning and less than direct, as the circumstances warranted. He skirted a question of whether the military's involvement in a major law enforcement initiative might not undermine its ability to carry out its core national security mission, simply averring that its participation was well within the institution's competency as outlined in Mexican law.

¶4. (U) In his formal presentation at the outset of the hearing, he ticked off his institution's accomplishments over the past five months:

--The cartels have lost close to \$4.7 billion in revenue since December 2006 as a result of drugs seizures by the armed forces.

--Ongoing intelligence operations targeting the cartels were undermining their leadership structure, even though they have resulted in few arrests of "narco-capos." However, in five months of surge operations 244 mid-level traffickers have been detained.

--The military is successfully mapping out the business enterprises of the cartels, including their major transshipment routes through Mexico from the south, and will be able to more precisely target traffickers in coming months.

--The armed forces will continue to concentrate their efforts in the "hot" trafficking zones of the Yucatan peninsula, Sonora, Chihuahua, Baja California, as well as Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas, which are currently being given high priority.

¶5. (U) Galvan agreed with a PRD interlocutor that desertions from the armed forces were troubling, saying that since 2000 there have been more than 112, 000. Without providing numbers, he recognized that "some" deserters had offered their services to the cartels.

Time to Update Mexico's Neutrality Law?

¶6. (SBU) Finally, Galvan weighed in on the push to amend Mexico's 1939 Neutrality law, which circumscribes foreign deployments by the armed forces as well as the presence of foreign troops on Mexican soil. Opposition legislators bitterly reacted to an attempt last week to bring Mexican law

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into closer alignment with its current international obligations and provide a basis for humanitarian deployments overseas. The Chamber's Defense Committee narrowly passed an initiative to amend the law only to see it stall on the floor. In a bit of double talk interpreted by some media as support for the status quo, Galvan said he believed the law should be kept, and that Mexico should concentrate on its own internal security, rather than focus on regional or "continental" security. However, he noted, circumstances have changed considerably since 1939, and that the law might be modified according to present day circumstances.

¶7. (U) Galvan concluded the hearing by saying he recognized his institution's responsibility to engage with congress, saying that he will make it a priority to maintain open and cordial relations with all elements of Mexican society.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: Although a bit stilted and less than incisive, the hearing gave both SEDENA's chief and legislators the opportunity to sharpen capabilities to engage in the kind of civil-military give and take that other democracies take for granted. Media coverage was moderate, and relatively painless from the military's point of view, with most papers highlighting Galvan's list of accomplishments. The experience hopefully helped limber the senior leadership of Mexico's armed forces and make it more amenable to engaging with their civilian counterparts across the board. End Comment.

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